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## Navy Mental Health Nurses – Force Multipliers

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By **Cmdr. Jean Fisak, NC**, *deputy director, Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control*



After more than a decade of war, the number of patients in need of mental health care continues to grow.

While the Psychiatric-Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMH) is relatively new to the Navy, the benefits have already been significant in addressing this increasing need. Navy psychiatric nurses provide direct patient care, work directly with other health mental health specialties, collaborate with other specialties related to mental health care, and influence policy.

In addition to being able to diagnose and treat, Navy psychiatric nurses can also deploy. To this end, my colleagues and I are force multipliers because we add to the overall pool of mental health providers able to meet the growing needs of Navy Medicine.

I recently had the opportunity to share my experiences as a Navy nurse specializing in mental health with a local association of psychiatric nurses that was comprised of both military and civilian providers. Outreach and education opportunities like this are so important because the military health care mission is inherently different from that of civilian care – we fight wars and need to have a fit and ready fighting force – and Navy Medicine patients can, and do, get referred to civilian care. Reaching out to our civilian counterparts helps them understand the military mission and how health care can impact service members.

By educating our partners in the civilian health care community to better understand the unique needs and limitations of our active duty patients we, as Navy nurses, are working to

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ensure Sailors and Marines get the best possible care while also preserving mission readiness. And, when it comes to dispensing medications and prescribing specific treatments, it's imperative that we help our civilian health care partners understand how these interventions can impact a service member's ability to deploy.

For those of us who have specialized and chosen to become advanced practice nurses; sharing our experiences with those just starting out in nursing is also important for building our community. Of course, we all think our individual specialties are the best, so recruiting the next generation of outstanding nurses that we want to work side by side with, and to eventually replace us when our time is done is well worth our time and effort. When I'm ready to retire, I want to know that I've done my part to train and mentor those who will pick up where I leave off and continue providing quality care and advocating for our patients.

Navy nurses are leaders. We lead by virtue of being naval officers and advocates for our patients. As Navy nurses, it's our responsibility and privilege to provide leadership to our junior hospital corpsmen as we mentor, train, and develop them. There is something truly unique and very special about the bond a Navy nurse has with hospital corpsmen.

For the corpsmen who gravitate toward my specialty as a behavioral health technician, I enjoy developing them to help deliver quality mental health care to our growing patient population. Whether they work on an inpatient mental health unit or serve with the Fleet Marine Forces (FMF), our corpsmen can be worth their weight in gold with the right training and skills to assist with assessments, perform crisis triage, facilitate therapy groups, and administer psychological testing. They can also participate in preventive measures by being taught operational stress control and resilience concepts to share with patients. As a leader within the Navy and my specialty, it's important that I provide the guidance needed to grow my corpsmen into an integral part of the mental health care team.

What we, as Navy nurses, do each and every day doesn't just advance our profession; it also furthers the field of mental health science and care. The role of the PMH nurse is vital to Navy Medicine because we:

- Expand the reach of specialty care to address the increasing need for mental health care providers
- Reach out to our civilian counterparts to help them understand military health care to better treat current and former service members
- Mentor the next generation of advanced care nurses
- Providing our corpsmen with the leadership and training they need to care for Sailors and Marines

Navy PMH nurses also reflect Navy Medicine's priorities by virtue of our role. We provide value as cost-effective mental health care providers and jointness by working with and educating our civilian counterparts. But most of all, we support readiness not only by training other nurses and corpsmen to deliver quality care, but by caring for the mental health and well-being of our Sailors and Marines to build and preserve a mentally fit and fighting ready force.

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